

Laying the Foundation

A Roadmap to Establishing
Affordable Teacher Housing

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Mountain View
Whisman
School District



Introduction

Teacher shortages and retention are a growing challenge for school districts across the country.

But teachers aren't the only shortage schools are suffering. Staff are also in high demand. At the start of the 2022-2023 school year, there was a shortage of 300,000 teachers and staff.¹

In high-rent areas, schools' inability to attract and retain teachers or staff often boils down to the question of affordable housing. Accepting a job in certain districts requires teachers and staff to take on multiple roommates or assume hours-long daily commutes. These situations seldom last.

Faced with constant staffing challenges, some districts and communities have turned to an innovative solution: developing their own teacher and staff housing facilities.

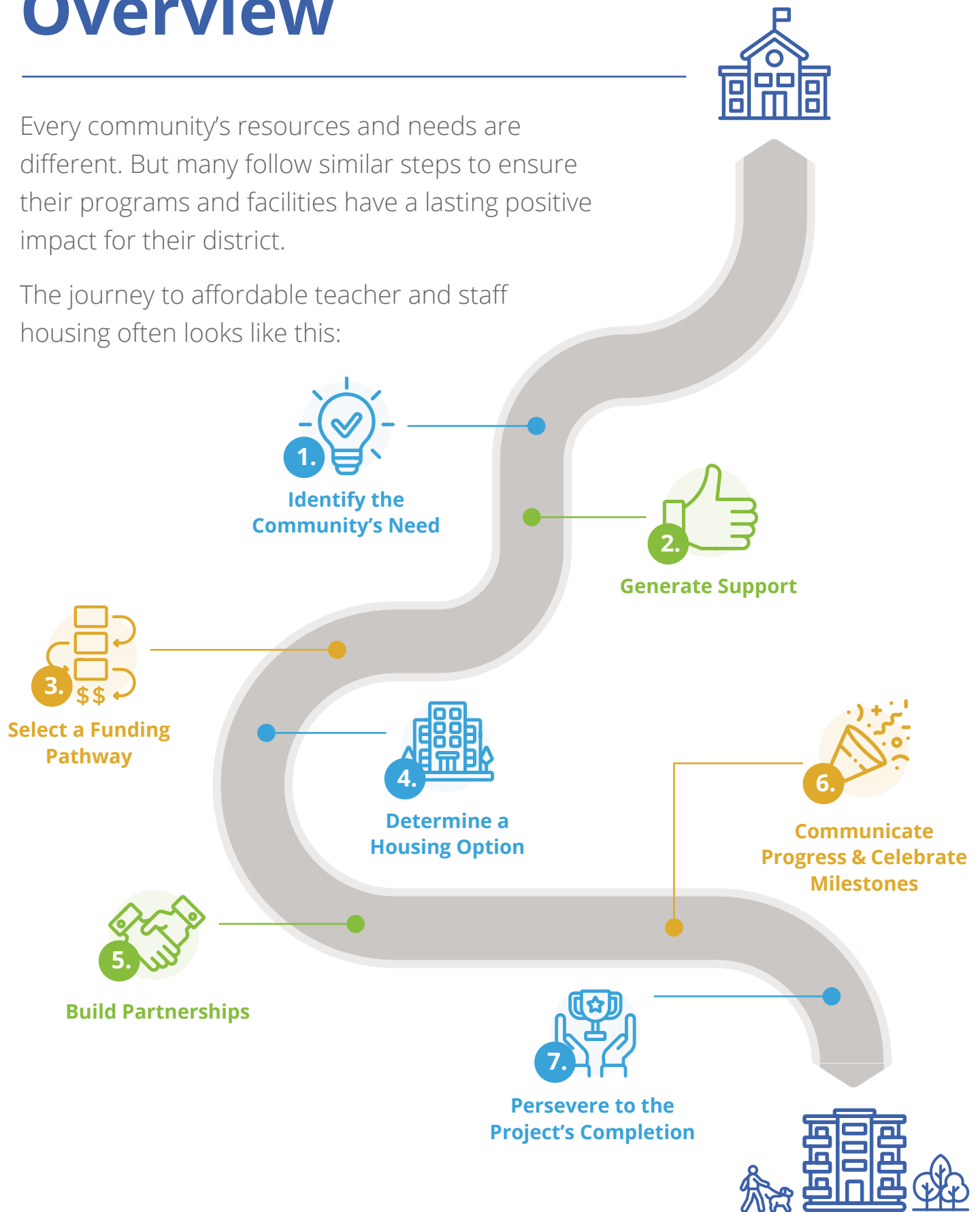
A project of this level is exciting and enticing, but also daunting. For many districts, the path forward is unclear. How can districts give themselves a strong start on a project that will likely take years to complete? Who should they speak to get the ball rolling? And where can they find potential funding opportunities?

This document offers a roadmap for policymakers and education leaders committed to exploring housing solutions for their districts and communities.

Overview

Every community's resources and needs are different. But many follow similar steps to ensure their programs and facilities have a lasting positive impact for their district.

The journey to affordable teacher and staff housing often looks like this:





Identify the Community's Need

Understanding the scope of a community's need is the first step.

Are housing challenges a contributing factor to the teacher and staff shortage your district is facing? And how many employees would take advantage of a housing facility if it became available?

To lay a strong foundation for this project, education leaders must understand the specific needs of their district. Two avenues can help identify the causes of retention issues and shortages, what a district's employees need, and what direction a school district should take to meet those needs.



Crunch the Numbers

Much of the knowledge needed is already available to district leaders.

Why have teachers and staff left?

Take some time to review internal data, such as exit interviews, and identify the recurring reasons why teachers and staff have left the school district. If a district struggles with teacher retention and doesn't keep records of why employees are leaving, it may be wise to begin collecting that information.

If housing costs, long commutes and cost of living are recurring answers, see what percentage of former employees cite these as reasons for leaving. Districts should know why people are leaving before they begin to plan a way to keep them.

What's stopping candidates from applying?

It is also valuable to compare the district's salary rates with average rent in the surrounding area. Many budgeting resources suggest housing should take up around a third of someone's monthly take-home pay. Are starting salaries for new teachers meeting this threshold, or is it a far cry from reasonable?

And rent alone doesn't account for how expensive it is to live in a community. Cost of living can also influence people to leave. Where do new hires and less experienced employees rank financially in comparison to the local community? Are they considered low income? Do they fall below the local poverty level?

As districts crunch the numbers based on those who have previously worked at their schools, they can also turn to their teachers and staff for greater insight.



IDENTIFY THE
COMMUNITY'S
NEED

GENERATE
SUPPORT

SELECT A
FUNDING
PATHWAY

DETERMINE
A HOUSING
OPTION

BUILD
PARTNERSHIPS

COMMUNICATE
PROGRESS &
CELEBRATE
MILESTONES

PERSEVERE TO
THE PROJECT'S
COMPLETION



Survey Your People

Seeking out direct engagement and responses from current teachers and staff can help district leaders understand exactly what their people need.

While conversations with a district's team are valuable, education leaders will want hard data to prove the need for an affordable housing project. The strongest way to accomplish this is to survey your teachers and staff.

Surveys might include questions like:

- » How long is your average commute?
- » Do you commute in on weekends as well?
- » Do you contribute more than 35% of your monthly take-home pay to housing costs?
- » Does homeownership seem within your reach?
- » How many people are in your household?
- » What is your household income?

And most importantly:

- » Would you consider living in a housing facility offered by the district?



TIP

Outsourcing survey work can ensure that your questions lack bias and can improve the findings' credibility.



Analyze the Findings

After surveying district employees, school districts will have a better understanding of what they need. Is it an affordable housing project? Is there enough interest in a project like this? Or are there alternative solutions, such as salary increases, that may be able to solve a district's teacher and staff shortages?

To chart the best course forward, combine the survey responses with data about past employees and local communities.

- » Is a lack of affordable housing or a lengthy commute the reason our district is losing teachers?
- » Would increased salaries alone fix the problem? Is there another solution?
- » Would teachers and staff actually use a facility like this?
- » How many staff members are living below the poverty level?
- » How many employees would qualify for below market-rate housing if available?



These are the questions key stakeholders are going to ask when a district suggests a teacher and staff affordable housing facility. Gathering the data ahead of time ensures that district leaders already have the answers. It quantifies the need and shows whomever it may be — a school board, a city council, a potential developer — that the district has done its homework.

Education leaders know the problem and the best path forward. Now it's time to show others how to get there.

As districts attempt to gain support, this data will be crucial in persuading important stakeholders of the value of an affordable housing facility. The survey process also gives policymakers and education leaders a starting point for building relationships with teachers and staff, who can help spread the word and generate further support for this project.

The Value of Personal Stories

An important part of building an argument in favor of the housing facility will be lived experiences. The teachers and staff have experienced the financial challenges that come with living in their community. They have lived with multiple roommates and had shocking commutes.

Districts should see if there are teachers willing to share their stories with the community — and thereby the families that they connect with. Their stories will add to a district's persuasive argument.





Generate Support

Developing an affordable housing facility is an ambitious endeavor.

With data to back a school district's vision, leaders can begin engaging key stakeholders to help make affordable staff housing a reality.



TIP

Try to anticipate potential concerns about the project and be ready to address them.

COMMON CONCERNS	READY RESPONSES
<p>“Housing won’t solve our teacher and staff retention problem.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Data show the magnitude of teacher and staff shortages in our district. » Exit interview and survey findings indicate housing as a leading factor.
<p>“This will be too expensive for our community.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Yes, there will be upfront costs required to fund this facility. But it’s an investment in the district’s students. » High turnover and constant searching to fill vacant positions are also expensive.
<p>“The district is meant to educate children, not be a landlord.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » The district will partner with a qualified property management company to oversee day-to-day facility needs. » Addressing teacher and staff shortages will free up more time for district and school leaders to meet the needs of students.



Getting the Board on Board

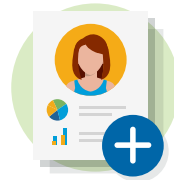
When it comes to a school district's operations, one key stakeholder is the school board. As a decision-making body, the board has significant sway over the direction a district takes.

Winning over its members is a necessary first step. Using the information that's been gathered, education leaders can:



Present the problem

Teacher & staff shortages, low employee retention, cost of living



Describe the data

Exit interview information, survey results



Showcase the solution

Affordable housing plan

Depending on the structure of a school district, the school board may determine whether a district moves forward with an affordable housing project. Education leaders must persuade them if they want this project to succeed.

And many times, school board members can provide valuable insight once a project is launched. As trusted members of the community, they may be able to connect their districts to public officials or private companies that can support the project in the long run.



Community Support

Once the school board has demonstrated support, districts should look to galvanize support among families and the local community. Opportunities for public outreach and engagement might include:

- » An op-ed in the local paper about the need to attract and retain more teachers
- » A town hall event hosted at a local school
- » An address to the PTA or PTO
- » A mass letter or email to school parents
- » Social media outreach highlighting stats on cost of living and teacher retention challenges

It's not just about ensuring that teachers and staff are welcomed with open arms. Broad public support will also help districts forge a strong

partnership with city officials. Public support can also play a critical role as districts determine a funding pathway.

In the early stages, district leaders should focus outreach on education policymakers and the general public. They should also seek out organizations that already offer housing opportunities, such as the city or low-income housing non-profits. It may be an opportunity to build a partnership that takes advantage of these organizations' existing resources and expertise.

As the process builds, however, leaders should look to also foster connections and garner support from public officials and even private companies.



Select a Funding Pathway

As the vision of affordable teacher and staff housing takes shape, school districts must determine how they'll fund a project of this magnitude.

Many factors influence funding decisions. Districts must be strategic and mindful of district resources, city resources, community engagement and more.

There are a handful of ways districts can fund an affordable teacher and staff housing project. Those options, each with its own benefits and disadvantages, are detailed below.



Bond Measures

One of the most straightforward methods of financing a teacher and staff housing facility is a bond measure. A school district may put a bond measure up for a vote, requesting funding specifically for the cost of the facility.

The ballot measure proposes additional spending at the local level and asks voters if they support

or disapprove of the measure. Prior to elections, district leaders will likely need to maximize public support and awareness to pass the measure.

The bond measure is a viable option for many school districts. The success of a bond measure demonstrates that a community is fully behind the project.

PRO	CON
<p>Covers significant costs.</p> <p>Bond measures can finance expensive projects for the school district. While districts pay for associated research and election costs, the benefits of financing through this method vastly outweigh the initial costs.</p>	<p>Requires significant public support.</p> <p>This funding method requires broad public support to pass. Education leaders will also need to understand local rules for campaigning on ballot measures.</p>



TIP

If a bond measure seems right for your district, brush up on the local laws about campaigning. Get in touch with professionals who can help in the planning process.





Certificates of Participation

Another option that districts may turn to is certificates of participation.

In this type of financing method, investors purchase shares of a program’s lease revenue.

In some states, a saleback or leaseback transaction may also open up opportunities to generate funding. While understanding certificates of participation may be an undertaking, this method may be worth it in the long run for some districts.

PRO	CON
<p>No vote required.</p> <p>Certificates of participation can be a faster form of funding than other methods, like a bond. There isn't a campaign required because there doesn't need to be a referendum or vote in the community to approve this type of support.</p>	<p>Drawing in investors.</p> <p>One challenge while creating certificates of participation is to identify interested parties and then support them throughout the process. Finalizing a certificate of participation requires dedication and a number of involved parties as contracts are written up.</p>



Sponsorships

Another avenue for funding a project is sponsorships. Districts may offer rewards, such as plaques of commemoration or named facilities, in exchange for donations and financial contributions to support the facility.

In some cases, a private company or philanthropist takes interest in a district's housing project. They may even be persuaded to help pay for it.

This method can also be supplemental and introduced at any point in the process. Once construction is underway or nearly complete, for example, sponsorships can be used to fund beautification efforts like public benches and flower gardens.

PROS	CONS
<p>Community engagement.</p> <p>Sponsors gain a sense of pride and participation in helping to fund this exciting new step toward their community's future.</p> <p>Simplifies funding.</p> <p>In the case of a singular donor, there is a clear entity who can be turned to as a steady stream of financial support. Having access to significant capital may also improve the overall quality of the facility.</p>	<p>Fundraising resources.</p> <p>To meet the financial demands of a large project, school districts must spend time and resources to identify and court potential donors. Naming of facilities may also prove challenging.</p> <p>Big shots are unlikely.</p> <p>Finding a philanthropist or organization willing to fund a project of this scale can be a long shot. Funding from a single entity may also come with stipulations or requirements that impact the project's overall success.</p>





Local Tax Opportunities

Some cities or counties may collect a parcel tax. This tax functions as a reserve, as it collects revenue and holds it for specific projects outside normal budgeting. Depending on a district's location and local tax rules, a school housing project may qualify as a recipient of these funds.

It's worth enquiring with the local government to see if an affordable housing facility could receive any funding. But this avenue shouldn't be relied upon as the main funding source.

PRO	CON
<p>Easily sourced.</p> <p>Funding may be easily accessed with help from public partners, such as the city.</p>	<p>Not guaranteed.</p> <p>There's no guarantee that a local community collects a parcel tax or that the housing facility would qualify as a beneficiary of those funds. And instituting a new source of tax revenue requires a campaign and vote from the public.</p>



General Funding

A last-resort method of funding this project is to pull from a district's general set of funds. Public school districts likely have a set of funds that

are granted every year for general operations or projects that arise.

PRO	CON
<p>Gets the job done.</p> <p>This provides the necessary funding, likely over several years.</p>	<p>Probably not in districts' best interests.</p> <p>Money that is for a district's general fund is often needed first and foremost for students and their education.</p>

Funding streams may continue to materialize after the housing facility is underway or even completed. For instance, a portion of tenants' rent can be allocated to paying down the debt on the facility. Districts can negotiate with the city, developers or other stakeholders on additional sources of revenue.

There are a variety of ways to fund an affordable teacher and staff housing project. Some districts may take one approach or may implement a combination of tactics. There's no perfect formula, but a multilayered approach can help districts diversify their sources of funding and ensure that everyone — from the developer to the taxpayer to the teacher — is pleased with the final result.

Selecting a funding path sets a district's budget, or at least provides a rough estimate, for this project. From there, districts may begin scouting locations or buildings to use for their facility.



TIP

Here's one example of how a district might pay for an affordable housing facility:

1. **Pass a bond measure** to cover a majority of the costs
2. **Offer sponsorships** later on in construction to fund beautification efforts
3. **Contract with the developer** to have some rent paid by district tenants cover the remaining costs over a set number of years





Determine a Housing Option

Once a district has selected a funding approach, leaders must decide where they will launch their affordable housing initiative and what kind of construction project it will be.

There are at least two options:

1. Repurposing existing buildings »
2. Starting from the ground up »

Both are viable, but the decision is largely influenced by what is available nearby.



Repurposing Existing Buildings

For some districts, the best option is to repurpose existing buildings to meet the district's needs. That may look like buying and renovating an existing apartment complex.

But districts aren't necessarily limited to apartment complexes. Other existing buildings may be repurposed or refurbished to meet local housing laws. In some cases, unused district buildings may be converted into affordable housing. Unused government buildings may be an option as well, or schools may purchase a

privately owned building, such as an office space, and overhaul it. Some states, like California, may encourage parties to transform unused buildings into housing facilities.

Using an existing building can cut down on time and construction costs. City, county and state codes may influence what districts can do with a building, however. Districts must ensure that a housing facility meets city code and is a feasible location for housing.



Starting from the Ground Up

In some instances, starting from the ground up is a district's best option. Purchasing a building to demolish or an empty plot of land allows districts a say from the very beginning on how their facility takes shape.

After identifying the need, districts have an idea of how many teachers and staff would be interested in living in district-sponsored affordable housing. Districts can then work with the architects,

developers and construction companies and plan the building with that number of tenants in mind.

These projects typically take longer, given the extensive construction involved. That time must be accounted for in the overall project timeline. The facilities, however, can be built with teachers and staff in mind. They may include common spaces where teachers can collaborate or socialize when they aren't at school.



Where to Start & What to Consider

While deciding what type of housing will best meet teachers and staff's needs, districts should consider several key questions:

- » Does this location or building meet housing codes in our city?
- » Does this location work for the school district, given all the schools' locations?
- » Does it have easy access to the local community and public transit?

A developer or construction company will help answer some of these questions. Once a relationship with a potential partner has been established, districts can work with private companies to narrow down exactly what they want to purchase and where.

The type of housing that a district selects will also influence the partnerships they forge.



TIP

Have someone familiar with the local housing code to consult on these issues. Regardless of what type of housing a district chooses, there are still potential pitfalls.



Build Partnerships

To get a project of this scale done — and done well — strategic partnerships will be critical.

Some districts may initially set out on this journey on their own. Others may have close ties to members of local government or private industry, which can be transformed into official partnerships. And the further a project like this advances, the more others will become involved.

There are three key kinds of partnerships that district leaders must consider:

1. Public partnerships »
2. Private partnerships »
3. Internal partnerships »

Each serves a different purpose, but all have the potential to make or break a project's chance of success.



Public Partnerships

A district's public partners are the public servants and members of local government who are heavily involved in the project.

That may include the mayor, city council, zoning and regulatory officials and more.

There is immense value in involving local government, such as the city, county or state, in a project like this. They may be able to speed the process of construction by seeing through zoning and coding updates.

They can also support the project financially, albeit indirectly. For example, they may be able to direct districts to a potential grant or other source of funding that would otherwise be unknown. Or, if a bond measure is the best funding path forward, public support from elected officials can have a

significant impact on what choice voters make.

There are drawbacks to relying heavily on public partnerships, however. School districts may have to negotiate with public officials on a number of things. Cities may, for example, request access to the affordable housing facility for their own staff and to meet below market-rate unit requirements in the city.

Chances are, if public school teachers and staff struggle to pay living expenses, public servants do too. School districts may negotiate over a set number of apartments that are dedicated not to teachers and staff, but to public servants.

And districts and local officials likely interact beyond this project. It's easy for other debates or issues to infringe on discussions or relationships. Staying focused and aligned on the housing project is paramount.



Private Partnerships

A district also needs private partners. External companies can provide a wealth of expertise and advice on how to best approach the project.

A construction company or developer is the most obvious private partner, and they will play a critical role throughout the years-long process. These private partners may also include others, however, such as the company that conducts the survey evaluating the district's need or a firm that helps campaign for the passage of a bond measure.

With private partnerships, districts should look for companies with mutual values and a shared vision. Finding the right partners and building strong relationships based on communication and trust will help this project go smoothly.





Internal Partnerships

Internal partners are fellow members of a school district who play a role in making this project a reality.

District employees, staff and labor unions, for example, support all aspects of this project, from managing official logistics to informally garnering public support. The school board makes decisions in the district's best interests. And, of course, district teachers and staff eventually benefit from the facility.

School districts should strive to maintain transparency with these partners and to provide regular updates.

These partners make up a school district's team, and district leaders will want to keep them in the loop, assuring them that their work is immensely valued, to maintain morale and generate momentum for the project.

Building strong relationships, managing partnerships effectively and relying on others' expertise is crucial throughout the process. As districts work alongside their partners, it's important to keep everyone informed, engaged and excited about the end goal.



TIP

Compromise can be key. It may mean negotiating the number of units in a building that are for teachers and staff, or persuading the city to adjust a site's building code.

District leaders must thoughtfully navigate these negotiations.





Communicate Progress & Celebrate Milestones

Completing a housing facility is a years-long process.

At times, the lack of immediate results may feel frustrating or disheartening. That's why districts should strive to communicate progress and celebrate milestones with the community.



Progress Reports

Establishing a rhythm of regular updates will ensure that everyone stays informed, on track and enthusiastic about the end goal.

What is the best way to convey regular updates? It's different for every district, but some options include:



Dedicating time during school board meetings to brief members on the project's progress



Distributing a regular newsletter to partners or the community that summarizes key updates



Maintaining a simple webpage dedicated solely to tracking the project's progress

Districts should consider the needs of their partners and community to find the ways that work best for their team to track and share progress.



A Pat on the Back

With each milestone, a celebration is in order. Projects this extensive take years, and keeping up morale is important.

Celebration-worthy moments may be:

- » Passing a bond measure
- » Signing a contract with a developer
- » Breaking ground on the construction site
- » Project completion or move-in day

Different milestones will have different celebrations.

The bond measure to fund the project passed? A district might throw an ice cream social for teachers, staff, community members and students and their families.

The developers are breaking ground on the construction? The district might host a groundbreaking ceremony. Have community leaders or teachers speak about the project and invite local media.

Identifying unique, smaller points of celebration for your project is also important. For example, videos or custom GIFs shared online with community members or stakeholders can infuse excitement and enthusiasm along the way.

Throughout the progress, inviting others into celebration is key. If community members want to receive updates, sign them up for the district's project updates. Welcome those who care about the project into the district's celebration. After all, it's not just about the district leaders. It's about the teachers and staff, the students and their families, the community. Celebrate with everyone.



Persevere to the Project's Completion

Housing facilities are an innovative response to a growing problem.

Get community support behind a district, forge the right partnerships and find the funding to make a meaningful long-term investment in educators.



Maintain and Evaluate

A housing facility requires a great deal of navigating relationships with stakeholders to anticipate the arrival of teachers and staff.

During long stretches of ongoing construction, district leaders must create the process, procedures and parameters for rentals. They must answer the following questions to provide teachers and staff with the criteria in advance:

- » What pay grades qualify for housing?
- » Is it a lottery system? Or is selection on a first-come, first-serve basis?

And with an identified process comes the need for management. School districts need to build a relationship with a property management company who will take over day-to-day operations of the facility.



The Final Stretch

Making it through the years-long process will require dedication and perseverance. Education leaders must understand the gravity and intense work required for the pieces to fall into place. But at the end, there will be housing options for teachers and staff that are sorely needed.

Investing in teachers and school staff is important, especially in the face of unrelenting academic shortages. It's a unique opportunity to welcome teachers and staff into the communities where they teach.

Every district has unique needs and resources, and for some an affordable housing facility is the right next step.



About the Author

Ayindé Rudolph, Ed.D., is the superintendent of Mountain View Whisman School District. The public school district serves K-8 students and their families in Silicon Valley.

Silicon Valley and its surrounding neighborhoods have some of the highest average rents in the nation. In August 2022, Mountain View had the 16th highest rent in the United States at an average of \$3,633 per month.²

For years, the district struggled with teacher retention, largely due to cost-of-living barriers. Teachers lived far away or with multiple roommates, but these scenarios seldom worked long term. Though the district implemented significant salary increases, teachers and staff still needed an affordable, local place to live.

Dr. Rudolph and Mountain View Whisman School District set out to create an affordable housing facility in 2017.³ Their journey has been long, but it has also been met with support from teachers, staff and the community. By working with the city and a local developer, Mountain View Whisman School District used a bond measure to secure funding and launch the facility's construction.

The housing facility, scheduled for completion in 2025, contains state-of-the-art studio, 1- and 2-bedroom apartments. The project is set to have 144 units, most of which are for school district teachers and staff who meet income requirements. The remaining units will be shared with city employees and the property management company.

Resources

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